

Dear Friends:

For 12 years, the respected magazine *Education Week* has taken stock of the nation's progress on public school improvements that really matter. The magazine's latest report card – *Quality Counts 2008* – puts South Carolina among the top 10 in overall state grades for education reform. This evaluation not only cites successes, but also shows us where to aim for higher achievement in the future.

The successes are worth celebrating:

- Our No. 1 ranking in efforts to improve teaching builds on our five-year history of high marks for attracting, developing and supporting skilled classroom professionals.
- Our Top 5 ranking for education policy-making echoes other national reports that call South Carolina a leader in creating statewide academic standards, tests to measure how well students meet those standards, and accountability laws to promote learning.
- Our national 4th-place tie for policies linking early childhood education, college readiness and the economy and workforce shows the influence of the state's landmark Education and Economic Development Act, which helps students see connections between what they learn in school and how they will use those academic skills in the real world.

Even with these high ratings, *Quality Counts 2008* shows we have much work left to do. Overall achievement in South Carolina – and in much of our region – continues to lag behind the country as a whole. We have made gains in student performance in recent years, but that won't meet the competitive challenge we face from schools in other states and nations.

Quality Counts 2008 gives our state a grade of C in two key areas that impact overall K–12 achievement. The first is a “chance for success” index that predicts a child's well-being from birth to adulthood, taking into account the life circumstances that he or she will face – social and economic as well as educational. The Palmetto State placed 39th in a 50-state and District of Columbia comparison.

That low rank is disappointing, but it may be cause for more optimistic than it appears. The latest South Carolina Kids Count report puts us in 46th place for children's well-being measured by health, family, economic, safety, and related factors. Far too many children come to school burdened by the consequences of poverty and other disadvantaged conditions. As Kids Count says: “What students bring with them to school is just as important as how they are taught in the schools.”

Leveling the playing field to give each student a “chance for success” means that educators, families, communities, lawmakers and leaders from all segments of our society must work together to reach a common goal – equal health, family, economic, and educational support for all of South Carolina's children. Nothing will change unless the

leadership and citizens of each county and of the state act on this priority with courage and commitment.

South Carolina's other C grade came in the school finance category, where *Quality Counts 2008* rated states according to per pupil spending and equity – whether funding is higher for schools in less-wealthy districts. Our score of 76.1 was below the national average, while the state's per pupil spending ranked in 34th place.

Changing South Carolina's antiquated, inadequate, and unfair approach to public school funding also must be one of our key aims. After years of tinkering, we still have a K–12 funding system where educational opportunities are about geography – a function of where a child happens to live, not what a child's needs might be.

The statewide task force that I asked to study funding reform is recommending remedies like a “poverty weighting” that takes into account higher costs associated with educating students who have special learning needs, who do not speak English, or who live in poverty. I'm eager to work with our General Assembly to craft a new funding approach that is adequate, affordable, and accountable to taxpayers.

South Carolina and nine other states received a D in the K-12 achievement index that measures current academic performance and gains made by students over time. The national average was D-plus in this category, with three states recording D-minus and four finishing with an F. The Palmetto State was in 41st place – tied with Oregon – based on recent reading and math scores, high school graduation rates, and results of Advanced Placement (AP) exams.

Quality Counts 2008 serves as a fitting summary of the year that has elapsed since I took the oath of office as your State Superintendent last January. After 12 months on the job, I'm convinced that South Carolina's public schools are making encouraging progress, yet still face very real needs to improve the quality of education for all students. Let's keep working to match our high marks in standards, policy making, and skilled teachers with an equally good grade on what matters most – how well our learners learn.

Sincerely,

Jim Rex
State Superintendent of Education